LOVE'S COMPLEXITY
Matthew 5:17-20, 27-33
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The Barbizon has been breached. The New York Times announced it solemnly last week. Time Magazine gave it two full columns. The famous New York hotel which housed women only since 1927 admitted its first man last week. In its heyday the hotel was home for young women working and studying in the city. Afternoon tea was part of the daily fare: there were two lounges where young men were admitted to play backgammon or listen to records - until 10:00 p.m. It was already a relic, a casualty of a cultural and ethical mentality that has changed altogether within the span of several decades. The morality - the way of life - represented by the very existence of a place like the Barbizon doesn't exist any longer.

Radical change has happened and, what is more difficult to perceive, is happening at the moment. The revolution in morality is not over yet: not by a long shot. Every so often we are forced to confront the extent of the change at strange times and places. It happened to me recently reading William Manchester's memoir of his experience as a Marine in the Second World War. Goodbye Darkness is the title and near the end Manchester is trying to explain why he got up from a hospital bed to join his battalion on Okinawa, one of history's bloodiest and most hellish battles. On Easter Sunday 1945 the Marines landed on an island sixty miles long and eight miles wide. Three months later 200,000 people were dead: Japanese Americans, Okinawans. Manchester tries to explain it and in the process reveals a great deal about how we have changed...He writes, "Debt was ignoble. Courage was a virtue. Mothers were beloved, fathers obeyed. Marriage was a sacrament. Divorce was disgraceful. Pregnancy meant expulsion from school or dismissal from a job. The boys reponsible for the crimes of impregnation had to marry the girls...there could be no wedding until the father approved. You assumed that gentlemen always stood and removed their hats when a woman entered the room. The suggestion that some of them might resent being called 'ladies' would have confounded you. You needed a precise relationship between the sexes, so that no one questioned the duty of boys to cross the seas and fight while girls wrote them cheerful letters from home, girls you knew were still pure because they let you touch them here but not there, explaining that they were saving themselves for marriage. All these and 'God bless America' and Christmas and the certitude that victory in the war would assure their continuance into perpetuity - all this led you into battle, and sustained you as you fought, and comforted you if you fell, and, if it came to that, justified your death to all who loved you as you had loved them...Later the rules would change. But we didn't know that then, we didn't know." (Goodbye Darkness, p.393-394).

The rules did change in our culture. And then they changed again. And in a very real sense, they are still changing. Manchester's wistful desciption of how it was is nostalgic but honest. And an important dimension of responsible Christianity, I am convinced, consists not in pining for the "good old days", but in acknowledging - looking squarely at - the newness, the terrible complexity of the moral issues facing us.

The catalog is familiar now. It's not the number of issues that frighten us, but their terrible complexity. In a recent essay Roger Shinn of Union Theological Seminary writes: "Every major decision about energy is a decision about both values and facts. That is why the current debates are so hard to resolve. Our world has too little experience in thinking through decisions when every value is embedded in a nest of intricate, controversial facts." (Journal for Preachers, Lent, 1981, p.4).

It doesn't take much reading, does it, to learn that the moral dimensions inherent in the production, distribution and use of energy, are infinitely complex? And energy is simply one of many areas which are emerging with distressing urgency. Alvin Weinburg, former director of Oak Ridge Laboratory, has suggested that we have made a 'Faustian bargain' to accept the benefits of science and technology in exchange for the risks.

The index of the current issue of Ethics, Journal of Ethical Theory, out of the University of Chicago, demonstrates the nature of the concern. The first article discussed the artificial prolongation of life and the exquisitely painful moral issues that attend it...issues which sound clear in the abstract but which take on another dimension altogether in a hospital when one's own relative hovers precariously between life and death. The next had to do with ethical implications in organ transplants, harvesting organs, organ banks and who, if anyone, should make a profit from this whole new business. The third article explored genetic research, the DNA controversy and the great debate within the research community about continuing into this truly Orwellian frontier of science. That's as far as I got in the journal. After the first three articles I was intellectually and emotionally exhausted.

Closer to home parents must deal daily with the moral implications of drugs, alcohol, and their accessibility in every school in the community. In addition, every young person in our culture is exposed to adult approved entertainment which nightly urges, portrays and celebrates sexual activity, prime time, hour after hour.

Finally, abortion; perhaps the most difficult of all. There is, for me at least, very little clarity. The issues overlap. When does life begin and who gets to decide? Whose right is most important? What about battered, unwanted children in the ghetto? What about wealthy people for whom abortion has always been readily accessible? I attended a seminar last summer partially to think this one through. It was led by Paul Lehman, leading ethical theologian. Lehman lectured for an hour on the subject without declaring his personal position. Finally, at the end, during the question and answer period one of the clergy - a woman in fact - demanded: "Dr. Lehman, are you for abortion or against it?" Paul Lehman answered, "Yes".

How we long for clarity and simplicity! How, in our heart of hearts we wish William Manchester's description of the rules were still accurate! The Moral Majority doesn't muster its millions of supporters on the basis of logic, or Biblical literalism, or internal consistency. Those aren't even important. The appeal is to clarity, simplicity; "this is right - that is wrong." It's very appealing. It's also misleading and potentially dangerous: oversimplication always is.

A second way to deal with complexity and uncertainty is to retreat behind a stout system of rules and regulations. That, perhaps, is humanity's favorite device. Dostoyevski got himself into countless Protestant sermons with his line in The Brothers Karamazov in which the Grand Inquisitor says: "If you really love people you want to make them happy, not free. People want law, not responsibility."

Elephant Man, a superb drama about the perils of Victorian morality, deals with legalism. John Merrick is the grotesquely deformed man's character, the Elephant Man, who is rescued from the crude cruelty of a freak show by Dr. Treves and given a home in a London hospital. There he learns to bathe himself and to repeat the phrase "Rules make us happy because they are for our own good." One day a janitor breaks the rules by staring at Merrick and is summarily fired by Dr. Treves. Merrick questions the decision, wondering about the janitor's family - what they will eat and how he'll pay the rent. Treves stoutly defends his action as appropriate because of his compassion for Merrick - the rules were made to protect him after all... The most pregnant line in the play belongs to the Elephant Man when he asks the doctor "If your mercy is so cruel, what do you do for justice?"

There is no single set of rules in the Bible. Even the Ten Commandments, the very basis of Hebrew law and the Covenant between God and His people, need interpretation and amplification and application. The whole concept of Biblical literalism comes apart in the area of ethical behavior and all of us, in fact, pick and choose among the multitude of

Biblical positions to find ones that suit us. It can be done on every particular issue. Joseph Sittler writes: "the desire to extrude principles from the Christ-life may be a form of our hidden human longing to make once and for all disposable, and to cool into palpable ingots of duty, the living stuff of love - and so dismiss the Holy One with whom we have to do." (Grace Notes and Other Fragments, p.10).

Our religion is not simply a set of rules. Our religion is a way of living creatively and responsively, out of our relation with one we know as Savior. It is a dynamic relationship with a living Lord. It provides something more important than a law: it promises a presence, power, discernment, direction for anyone brave enough to be responsible. Our texts this morning are illustrative. In the first the people of Israel are on the Plain of Moab, still on their way to the promised land. The Covenant and the giving of the law are long in the past. The emphasis in the words of Moses on this occasion is on the necessity to decide daily between the right and the wrong. "Choose this day," he urges the people. A faithful ethic, therefore, is existential, wrapped up with, involved in the complexities and ambiguities of life.

The New Testament lesson was a chunk of the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps the most important piece of ethical teaching in the history of human ideas. Everything Jesus said about ethics, the good life, righteousness, must be heard in the context of the overwhelming oppressive legalism of His culture. His people had a rule for everything. They had come to define religion as obeying without omission or default every single line and punctuation mark in the law of Moses. Jesus was part of that. In the first section we heard this morning He affirmed: "I have not come to abolish the law...whoever does and teaches (these commandments) shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven." And then in what was a stunning turnaround, a reversal so incongruous that we miss it, He went on..."Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the Kingdom." The simple fact is that if righteousness is obeying the rules, you couldn't exceed the scribes and Pharisees. You can't bat more than 1,000. You can't refrain from stealing any more than another person is also refraining. Jesus, obviously, was demanding something more: something more complex, more difficult, but more honest.

The entire Sermon on the Mount must be read in that context. The two portions I chose this morning are difficult and controversial. In the first Jesus identifies lust with adultery and suggests that to look at another lustfully is to be guilty of what you're thinking about. Emil Brunner used to say that the Sermon on the Mount makes murderers and adulterers out of every healthy human being. Someone else said, "If Jesus was serious you might as well go ahead and do it because you'll be blamed for it in the end anyway." In the second section Jesus discusses divorce in a way that contemporary preachers, facing a divorce rate today hovering around 50%, ordinarily, and prudently, ignore.

Again, however, the sense of it remains obscure apart from the situation. Judaism always held marriage in high esteem - the flaw in the system was that women were regarded as property. She belonged to her father and, after her marriage, to her husband. There were two schools of Rabbinic thought on the subject of divorce. One school prohibited divorce for any reason other than adultery. The other - and prevalent - school allowed divorce for nearly any reason a husband might regard as legitimate including a poorly prepared meal, or the simple appearance of another woman whom he found more attractive.

But it was also a Greek world, and the Greeks had a very distinct view of marriage. Listen to the philosopher Demosthenes..."We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure; we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; we have wives for the sake of having children legitimately, and of having a faithful guardian for all our household affairs." Commenting on that situation William Barclay wrote, "It is easy to see what an incredible

novelty the Christian teaching regarding chastity and fidelity was in a civilization like that." (Daily Study Bible, Matthew, Vol. I, p.152-3).

It is not appropriate, in Sittler's words, to extrude a rule out of these few phrases of Jesus. What emerges, I would propose, is a radical, creative new way to think ethically.

Jesus, more than anything, valued the people about whom ethical decisions must be made. The person - not the principle - mattered most to Him. He did not advise the discarding of the rules. He simply evidenced, over and over again, that people mattered more. He favored chastity; He saw marriage as a life commitment, a total relationship. He also forgave: He protected and befriended a prostitute. He enabled all sorts of people to live their own lives more honestly because of His steadying love.

Love gets complex at times. Doing the right thing assumes that we know what the right thing is, and that's not often as easy as it sounds. What the Gospel of Jesus Christ promises is not simple answers, but the strength and impetus and resource by which to confrc our issues honestly and faithfully. see RH here

For some that sounds very frightening. For some it sounds loose, easy and therefore, unfaithful. I would propose to you, however, that God's love in Jesus Christ embraces our humanity, with all its complexity. I would propose that the good news is that God's Son has been one of us and knows our frame and our heart and mind. The good news, ethically, is that God forgives the mistakes we make and won't let our failures keep us separated from Him. The good news is that there is a Kingdom breaking into the world. It doesn't come miraculously out of the clouds: it comes - I believe - in the middle of complex life situations, quickly, but resolutely, like leaven working in bread. It breaks in surprisingl occasionally, when some brave and honest soul makes an ethical decision that reflects the spirit of Jesus Christ himself. Contrary to many of its more popular expressions the essence of Christianity is not the guilt we can generate by contemplating how much we fail, but the gentle pull of a Kingdom breaking into our world, our lives, our relationships; a Kingdom characterized by kindness, forgiveness, peace, love, honesty.

In the meantime it is our lot - our God-given vocation - to live with, and deal with love's complexity. May we do so with courage and cheer and grace and compassion for one another.

Amen.

God of perfect love, our love is flawed by selfishness and fear. Help us to become more than we are. When we shrink from the complex issues which grip our world, shove us into their midst - armed with a love that will never let us go. In Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.